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The Pleasurable Pain of Melancholic Solitude: Examining Rousseau's Emotional Self-Indulgence in Reveries of the Solitary Walker

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The Pleasurable Pain of Melancholic Solitude:

Examining Rousseau's Emotional Self-Indulgence in *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*

The Romantic period is largely defined by the emphasis it places on the sensibilities of the individual. Developing from the sentimentalism of the mid-eighteenth century, and its appreciation of the value of emotion as a necessary balance to intellect and reason, the Romantic period further privileged the inner world of the individual. The evolution of the Romantic solitary thinker, however, is reflective of an important revaluation of emotion detached from public service and redirected toward the fulfillment of the self. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pre-Romantic text, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, offers a crucial bridge between sentimental and Romantic modes of thought, illustrating how a famous man's retreat from society provides a space for the reveries and reflections of the individual mind. Throughout the text, Rousseau repeatedly expresses and expands on the profound feeling of what we might call melancholic solitude: a condition resulting from the experience of his partly forced, partly self-imposed exile. At its strongest, this emotionally-driven form of solitary existence, accentuated by physical isolation and the pleasurable presence of nature, involves experiences of the profound that results from an inward turn to the self. The Rousseau of *Reveries* is an emotional, expressive, almost naïve individual whose initial feelings of alienation are transformed into a blissful state of pleasure. This change results in the sheer enjoyment of the simple existence he has found through indulging himself in memories, and through the tranquil, peaceful experience of real solitude. The aimless tangents of Rousseau's *Reveries* embody the Romantic privileging of the emotive self with all its apparent contradictions. In *Reveries*, Rousseau presents himself simply as a man, with all his contradictions, flaws and nuances appropriately expressed through his integrally aimless writing. Plunged into melancholy, and reveling in the beauty of nature (as

especially evident in his “Fifth Walk”), Rousseau reflects on the melancholic solitude that liberates his being. Through the inwardly focused indulgence of reverie, Rousseau’s reveries allow him to perceive transcendental, and sometimes even divine, properties in his own existence.

The emotive experiences of *Reveries* can best be understood through the Romantics’ understanding of melancholy. Although melancholy’s historical relevance dates to the four humours of ancient Greece and its association to “black bile,” it was not until the development of the idea of the individual that its emotional properties began to be examined in a more proto-psychological sense. As Clark Lawlor explains in his historical account of the subject, “the second half of the eighteenth century began to regard the life of the emotion as having a significance equal to the life of the reasoning mind” (84). And yet, as Lawlor insists, the phenomenon of melancholy was progressively seen as a symptom of an increasingly civilized European society; bored, privileged men such as Rousseau – “sons of idleness” who “do no meaningful work” – “rely on continuous dissipation to defeat the insupportable tediousness of an inactive life and kill time by pleasure” (90). In this sense, melancholy was often perceived as a useless, even detrimental condition that came into existence as a result of European luxury. By the Romantic period, however, such uselessness was becoming celebrated for the tremendous insight into the evolving human condition that it revealed. “The increased focus on the self,” Lawlor writes, “as opposed to the civic and social responsibilities of the earlier period, meant that Romantic melancholy intensified the idea of this disease as a marker of self-reflection, permitting contemplation of the deepest aspects of existence, and generally typifying creative genius” (98). The Romantic period permitted a self-indulgence that would have likely been met with harsh criticism in the past, with the symptoms of melancholy being perceived more as a

disease. While the term self-indulgence would have connoted a negative response from earlier generations, the Romantics saw it as a gateway to self-knowledge. Rousseau's *Reveries* is a testament to such cultural revaluations. As such, the solitary self-indulgence of Rousseau's reclusive sufferer in search of internal peace comes to be esteemed as a respectable form of emotional intelligence.

To discuss the melancholic solitude at the heart of Rousseau's text, it is important to define the often-distorted concept of melancholy, not as a clinical term, but as an emotional experience. Perhaps the most problematic popular conception of melancholy is that it is synonymous with depression. While melancholy can include negative sentiments, it is a much more complex, multifaceted state, with a wider range of possible feelings than merely pessimistic depression. As Emily Brady classifies it, melancholy has a "dual nature" different from the rawer pain of depression and other simple emotions. Melancholy is not simply "a debilitating mood"; "its reflective or thoughtful aspect" make melancholy "somehow productive . . . for it provides an opportunity for indulgent self-reflection. We enjoy this time out for reflection, but the pleasure is also connected to recollecting that which we long for, where this reflective element can be even exhilarating or uplifting." The apparent productivity of melancholy's self-reflective indulgences is what creates its potential to be pleasurable. As an emotion, its sentimental nature calls for a turn away from the external world and toward the self, where one can revel in pleasurable memories and overcome the limitations of other "raw" emotions through a reflective and detached perspective. As Rousseau suggests, this type of emotion "becomes so captivating that we eventually come to regard it as the height of happiness" (88). By contrast, searching for happiness through an external source reveals that "there's nothing solid there for the heart to attach itself to. Thus our earthly joys are almost without

exception creatures of a moment” (88). Because “[e]verything is in constant flux on this earth”, one should not depend on anything external to provide long-term happiness, for it is bound to change from the form that brought the most pleasure, be it another person or a positive sentiment to a specific object (Rousseau 88). Accordingly, melancholy is not a pleasure that associates itself with any physical object; rather, it is a feeling of the divine and sublime within. By simply existing with it, a flow of tranquil happiness and uplifting peace can be felt coursing through the soul. With simple emotions, such as joy or sadness, one feels a certain way about an external source that is attached to the outside world; the pleasure of melancholy, however, has no external association; it simply results from a state of mind brought about by solitary reflection.

Although melancholic solitude is mainly an experience resulting in tranquil pleasure, pain plays an important role in facilitating it, as reflected in Rousseau’s exile leading up to the writing of *Reveries*. Brady’s notion of melancholy as “a mature emotion in which reflection calms a turbulent soul” reflects its healing power, which explains its role in helping Rousseau overcome the misery of exile. For Rousseau, the alienation he must have felt initially upon his exile worked to trouble him enough emotionally that he turned to his imagination and reveries. This apparent inclination for the hurt soul to seek pleasure in the familiar explains Rousseau’s new-found passion for botany (which he discusses in the “Seventh Walk”), a hobby that keeps his mind busy and with which he can further immerse himself in the natural world he seems to adore. Throughout *Reveries*, Rousseau continuously fends off despair by indulging in the pleasures of melancholic solitude. In this manner, the involuntary solitude of his exile is transformed into a pleasurable retirement. As Michael Bell suggests, Rousseau’s melancholy is in many ways a direct result of his initial rejection by society: “the underlying precondition is his social isolation; only his outcast state has made this experience and its accompanying insights available to him”

(151). Without the initial pain that settles one's mind into a melancholic mood, the pleasures that come from indulging in this emotion would never come.

While Rousseau discusses his natural inclination to seek pleasure inwardly in multiple Walks, it is in the "Fifth Walk," when he reflects on the Island of Saint-Pierre, that he appears at his most confident and enlightened. He writes: "Complete silence induces melancholy; it is an image of death. In such cases the assistance of a happy imagination is needed, and it comes naturally to those whom Heaven has blessed with it" (Rousseau 90). Melancholy possesses the mind with such a powerful tranquility that Rousseau likens it to the profound quiet of death, in a state that is detached from external existence and inspires the imagination to provide pleasurable reveries. While experiencing this comatose sense of peace, the imagination can abandon the objects and perceptions of the exterior world in favor of an inner, death-like quiet through which one can retreat from worldly pain. In his introduction to the *Reveries*, Peter France argues that the very writing of the book is likely done by Rousseau to console himself from the pain of his exile: "it is as if Rousseau were building himself a refuge from the attacks of others and from his own fears and doubts" (14). Beyond its purpose as a sort of diary-like refuge for Rousseau, *Reveries* is compellingly free and apparently purposeless. And yet, the text's repetitive and, at times, self-contradictory nature, only adds to the importance of the book's embracement of useless reverie as a rejection of worldly reason.

Written over a century earlier than *Reveries*, John Milton's poem "Il Penseroso" offers the groundwork for the pensive, solitary figure that Rousseau would in many ways eventually embody by poetically expressing the experience of melancholic solitude. Rousseau further develops the more general, depersonalized poetic figure Milton had originally established by providing the context of his own lived experience. Taken together, the two works can be used to

examine the effects of melancholy in more purposeful, personal detail. While Milton's poem provides an introspective account of a pensive solitary figure's aesthetic search for self-knowledge, it is missing the key framework of the human individual, whose memories, aspirations, and emotional responses, are essential to consider in order to fully explore the effects of melancholic solitude. The writings of an expressive individual such as Rousseau are, therefore, much more valuable in understanding the experience of melancholic solitude, however less focused and deliberate they may be. Milton's poem is wholly invested in establishing a paradoxically gloomy yet appealing solitary atmosphere, "[f]ar from all resort of Mirth," in which the reflective pursuits of melancholy can thrive (81). The mood of Milton's poem is consistently tranquil and ultimately pleasurable, creating a figure whose feelings are difficult to access and relate to. Yet it must be noted that Milton was a Renaissance writer, and the individualism and free-floating introspection privileged by the Romantics is clearly absent from "Il Penseroso." For this reason, Milton's speaker is limited in expressing the melancholic experience. Because he is simply a rhetorical poetic figure, rather than an emotionally complex individual whose retreat from society is the result of real life challenges, Milton's poem falls short of exemplifying the complex nature of melancholic solitude depicted by Rousseau's *Reveries*.

To understand how exactly Rousseau achieves his state of melancholic solitude requires examining the nature of what he calls "reverie": a sort of daydreaming that, existing outside the realm of thought, is an emotional indulgence of the imagination with the ultimate purpose of providing pleasure for the self. Rousseau best defines the experience of his own reveries in the "Seventh Walk," where he directly contrasts it with logical thought:

...reverie amuses and distracts me, thought wearies and depresses me; thinking has always been for me a disagreeable and thankless occupation. Sometimes my reveries end in meditation, but more often my meditations end in reverie, and during these wanderings my soul roams and soars through the universe on the wings of imagination, in ecstasies which surpass all other pleasures (107).

As Rousseau suggests, thought is filled with too much intention and purpose to be pleasant, while reverie operates outside of this limited focus. The relationship between thought and reverie directly parallels the differences between depression and melancholy discussed earlier: while thought is focused around a specific topic – one thinks inevitably about something – reverie is unrestricted because of its very purposelessness beyond the self-interests of the individual. For Rousseau, this is fundamental to its usefulness in providing pleasure: “everything that concerns my needs saddens and sours my thoughts, and I never found any real charm in the pleasures of the mind unless I was able to forget all about the interests of the body” (111). Melancholy is, therefore, the ideal emotional state to partake in the pleasures of reverie as they both depend on pure self-indulgence and a disregard for the useful.

Rousseau uses reverie to interact with memories; however, in doing so he is essentially rejecting reality and living in an imaginary and possibly illusory world of his fancy. In discussing this potential problem, Bell argues: “The only fitting location for the romantic longing is the realm of the aesthetic understood now as representing a mode of contemplation explicitly opposed to life. In this tradition, the romantic emotion constantly acknowledges its illusory status in the self-consciousness of the fiction as fiction” (153). In many ways, melancholic solitude can lead to a self-conscious retreat from reality. While this may seem potentially problematic, if melancholy’s primary functions are the overcoming of pain and an indulgence in self-

knowledge, then this turn to illusion seems entirely necessary. Indeed, melancholic solitude may even seem selfish, especially considering the socially aware and involved figure that Rousseau was in his earlier life. Yet, focusing on morality and self-deception as problems in this context threatens to devalue the self-therapy and psychological relief achieved by “giv[ing] [himself] over entirely to the pleasure of conversing with [his] soul” (Rousseau 32). What Rousseau accomplished with *Reveries* is a valuation of the possibilities of the imagination. He does not intend to present, however, this fantasy as an alternative to reality, but as a means to enhance the experience of one’s own existence in the emerging realm of the self. Through reverie, Rousseau is “finding the beatific in an escape from time . . . [h]is past is an inexhaustible well” (Bell 152). It is precisely because the imaginary exists outside of time and place that melancholic solitude affords Rousseau an infinite source of pleasure.

The capacity of melancholic solitude to divorce the individual from time and place connects it with the analogous emotional experience of the sublime. Although the sublime differs in intensity to melancholy, it is part of the same kind of emotional feeling, and examining one experience can shed light on the workings of the other. Frances Ferguson theorizes that “we react with dread and awe to what is sublime because of its appearing greater than we are, for being more, and making us acknowledge its power” (8-9). The sublime’s fixation on what is greater than the self proves especially useful in considering the associations between melancholic solitude and the divine that both Rousseau and Milton take note of. The sublime shares melancholy’s disregard for external, physical objects, as well as “a commitment to self and self-preservation” and an interest in the profound (Ferguson 8). While the pleasure of melancholic solitude is a constant feeling that comes from the simplicity of the existence it provides, the sublime is concerned with a more epiphanic acknowledgment of a power greater than the self: a

power not unlike God. Milton introduces the connection between melancholy and the divine early in “Il Penseroso”: “Hail divinest Melancholy, / Whose saintly visage is too bright / To hit the sense of human sight” (12-15). While there is no strict correlation between melancholic solitude and godliness, for religious believers such as Milton and Rousseau, the association between the tranquil, enlightening emotion and conceptions of the divine is only natural. Rousseau comments that the happiness granted in this state comes from “nothing external to us, nothing apart from ourselves or our own existence; as long as this state lasts we are self-sufficient like God” (89). By abandoning all external attachments, Rousseau believes one can achieve a state of being so free from the chains of society that we become profoundly God-like beings ourselves, having nothing and desiring nothing outside of the pleasure of simply existing. Where the force of the sublime experience violently shatters the individual ego, the force of melancholy comes from a liberating disassociation from that which is individual. In this sense, the prolonged simplicity of melancholic solitude achieves a result that is similar to the shocking sublimity of perceiving something greater, even though the two provide fundamentally unique epiphanic experiences.

Ultimately, Rousseau’s reflective journey is more tranquilly melancholic than explosively sublime, and at one point he indirectly addresses his preference for the former when considering his problem with the more intense experience that the sublime is associated with: “These brief moments of madness and passion, however powerfully they may affect us, can because of this very power only be infrequent points along the line of our life . . . and the happiness for which my soul longs is not made up of fleeting moments, but of a single and lasting state” (87). Despite their similar natures, the experience of melancholy as opposed to sublimity is ultimately quite different. Rousseau finds peace in melancholy’s easy, constant state, a pleasure that comes

simply from existing and needing nothing else. But in terms of perceiving the divine, melancholy and sublimity offer opposing means of locating God. While sublimity can bring one to appreciate and awe at His higher power above all things in a theistic sense, melancholy is more interested in the deistic view of God. The tranquil ease of melancholic solitude allows Rousseau to feel a presence existing in and among all creation, a oneness which locates God closer to the self. As he suggests, the sensitive soul, in a “blissful state of self-abandonment . . . loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at one. All individual objects escape him; he sees and feels nothing but the unity of all things” (Rousseau 108). This passage describes a dissolution of the physical self, and a mental, even spiritual, liberation of the self into the consciousness of a being that many believers would call God. Milton parallels this sentiment toward the end of his poem, calling on Melancholy to “Dissolve [him] into ecstasies, / And bring all heaven before [his] eyes” (165-166). In the same way that a melancholic solitary such as Rousseau or the speaker of “Il Penseroso” achieves a self-sufficient state resembling godliness, the experience of melancholy itself becomes a sort of tranquil Romantic heaven that exists entirely within the mind, and in which everything is joined in oneness. Rousseau sums up the feeling of this heavenly space in the “Fifth Walk”:

a state where the soul can establish itself and concentrate its entire being . . . where time is nothing to it . . . and no other feelings of deprivation or enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear than the simple feeling of existence, a feeling that fills our soul entirely, as long as this state lasts we can call ourselves happy, not with a poor, incomplete and relative happiness such as we find in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, complete and perfect happiness which leaves no emptiness to be filled in the soul. (88)

Despite owing itself to an external environment that triggers the complex emotion, the realm of melancholy is a place that, paradoxically, has no presence in the physical world. Melancholy's detachment from all things physical – which are in turn temporary – ensures that it can sustain itself as a constant source of pleasure.

Given the paradoxical nature of melancholic solitude, one of the most complex and important considerations is the role of actual physical isolation in producing the necessary feeling. The necessity of mental detachment from the external world to create a space for internal solitude to function is clear enough. However, opinions on the importance of physical detachment in facilitating the emotion, and the idea of the ideal melancholic space, vary greatly. Michel de Montaigne, in his influential essay “Of Solitude,” explains solitude as fundamentally internal. Its power, he insists, comes from unburdening the soul of worldly attachments: “it is not enough to have gotten away from the crowd, it is not enough to move; we must get away from the gregarious instincts that are inside us, we must sequester ourselves and repossess ourselves” (213). Furthermore, Montaigne emphasizes that solitude can be experienced without physical isolation: “Therefore we must bring [the soul] back and withdraw it into itself: that is the real solitude, which may be enjoyed in the midst of cities and the courts of kings; but it is enjoyed more handily alone” (214). Rousseau follows Montaigne's line of thinking by suggesting that “[t]his type of [melancholic] reverie can be enjoyed anywhere where one is undisturbed” (90). Rousseau's only apparent precondition, therefore, for indulging in reverie seems to be finding any space where external elements are not interfering. In considering *Reveries*, Michael Bell refers to this same idea of a space comprising only of the bare minimum through a metaphor likening the melancholic space to a cell: “the only place in which he can experience the passion to which he is nonetheless committed is the antechamber to eternity represented by the cell . . .

[f]or him, the world inside the cell has more reality than the everyday world outside” (153). The metaphorical cell to which Rousseau retreats in *Reveries* can, therefore, be understood in accordance with his self-imposed exile, done to get away from his problems with society and to enter a space where the self is the only real presence. This cell does not necessarily need to contain anything other than the solitary figure inhabiting it. In other words, the bar minimum required for melancholic contemplation is no more than a space drained of everything else: an empty cell. Milton’s pensive figure speaks favorably of dark, black, night-like spaces: a “mossy cell” or “some still removèd place . . . Where glowing embers through the room / Teach light to counterfeit a gloom” (78-80, 169). The cell that offers peace of mind and an atmosphere “removed” from external disturbances is, therefore, the only *requirement* for experiencing the effects of melancholic solitude. The cell’s total emptiness can then be personalized, in a sense, filled with whatever aesthetic preference the solitary individual draws pleasure from – whether it be a dark, gloomy room or the grand expanse of nature.

The idea of nature as a popular space for melancholic introspection can be found in countless Romantic texts. The natural world is often seen as a logical retreat to reflect upon the nature of the self. While Rousseau himself hardly addresses the importance of nature in helping him achieve his state of melancholic solitude, the natural world’s apparent significance can be found all throughout *Reveries*, from his fascination with botany to his profound experience on the Island of Saint-Pierre, where he indulges in the spectacle of nature. Focusing on the personal importance that nature holds for Rousseau, Prabhu Venkataraman argues: “Throughout his life nature has served as his mirror for self-examination; it acts as a trigger for various memoires, it provides a harmonious setting for delving into the more painful of these memoires, and allows him to extract insights that enable him to face his mortality” (327). Rousseau has a specific idea

of nature, which includes the “[t]rees, bushes, and plants” that he calls “the clothing and adornment of the earth,” rather than the “bare, barren countryside that presents the eyes with nothing but stones, mud and sand” (108). In ways that redouble Rousseau’s interest in botany, his version of nature is therefore selective toward the greenery of plant life, further emphasizing that it is not the natural world itself that helps induce melancholy, but whatever aesthetic environment offers the most pleasurable associations for the individual. Put simply, there is no objectively superior environment to be found; the importance hinges on subjective associations tied to memories and feelings from the soul, and the popular appearance of nature in Romantic writing can, in many cases, be attributed to the many positive experiences people have in admiring its beauty.

The positive experience Rousseau derives from nature is best exemplified in the “Fifth Walk.” The chapter is filled with Romantic descriptions of the island’s natural environment and of a total tranquility that works only to support his melancholic solitude. He experiences a particularly profound sensory experience by the “edge of the lake”:

there the noise of the waves and the movement of the water, taking hold of my senses and driving all other agitation from my soul, would plunge it into a delicious reverie in which night often stole upon me unawares. The ebb and flow of the water, its continuous yet undulating noise, kept lapping against my ears and my eyes, taking the place of all the inward movements which my reverie had calmed within me, and it was enough to make me pleurably aware of my existence, without troubling myself with thought. (Rousseau 86-87)

While the natural phenomenon of the waves appears to impose itself on Rousseau’s senses, it is not in any way problematic for the melancholic experience because he is still essentially

“undisturbed” by the experience. As Bell observes, “the regular sound of the waters occupies and lulls his senses,” rather than distracting him, “and connects him to the outside world without intruding on his inner calm and absorption” (151). While the sights and sounds are external, the regularity and continuousness of the sensory experience deprives it of the jarring nature of a sudden sublime surprise. Accordingly, the waves work to enhance Rousseau’s melancholy, as they contribute to the steady self-awareness of his fantastical reverie and enable easy entrance into the timeless, formless space of imagination. This perception of the ebb and flow of the water exemplifies the nature of Rousseau’s solitary “cell,” providing a feeling of self-knowledge regarding his existence without enough external focus that it would encourage reason or thought, which, in turn, would inevitably break the spell of melancholy. While the external triggering mechanisms are distinct for both, the transcendental nature of Rousseau’s melancholic experience is not unlike that of the sublime. As Ferguson notes: “The experience of sublime pleasure in nature is seen, in other words, as transcendental because of its not needing to be taught, and indeed because of the way in which the construction of the lesson plan for that learning is itself unimaginable” (4). Although it is important not to forget the differences between melancholy and sublimity, Ferguson’s notion here applies to both profound experiences. The self-knowledge to be discovered from melancholic solitude and the experience of reverie is a sort of learning that is unimaginable until one is in the correct state of mind, and for Rousseau, the natural world acts as a gate to help enter that introspective space.

With *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Rousseau escapes the chains of society by retreating into a state of melancholic solitude: an emotional state that helps him escape the pain of his exile and find peace with his own self. Rousseau’s text provides a significant look forward to the inward turn of Romantic epistemology, providing a deep, diary-like access into an

individual's complex relationship to melancholy. Indulging his emotions, Rousseau feeds off reveries that provide an endless source of pleasure, reaching into feelings of the past and the beauty of the natural world that surrounds him, while ultimately heightening the profound properties of the simple existence he has taken on. Rousseau's *Reveries*, and especially the compelling "Fifth Walk," is a tremendously useful text for examining the transition from sentimentalism to Romanticism during the latter half of the eighteenth century: a transition marked by deeply reflective, personal accounts of the emotional phenomenon of melancholic solitude.

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Abstract

Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* celebrates self-indulgent emotion through the seemingly paradoxical state of melancholic solitude. Although useless in terms of its impact on the world, melancholy is a complex emotion with a deep introspective nature that can lead to the simultaneous indulgence in, and effacement of, the self. While Rousseau's melancholic state can be understood as a retreat from the painful trials and tribulations of the public world, his self-imposed solitude encourages peace specifically through the inwardly focused indulgence of "reverie," a seemingly purposeless solitary rumination encouraging self-knowledge. This essay explores the personal and pseudo-divine nature of Rousseau's self-effacing reveries to consider how melancholic solitude and self-imposed exile function together, not merely as an act of selfishness, but as an essential pathway for experiencing a pseudo-divine form of existence. Rousseau's intense emotional self-indulgence feeds off these reveries, providing an endless source of pleasure by exploring feelings and significant memories that are triggered by the beauty of the natural world. The natural world serves as a trigger for stimulating Rousseau's melancholic reveries, thereby indicating the importance of a subjectively significant physical atmosphere to enhance an otherwise wholly internal experience. The combination of mental detachment from the external world with actual physical isolation – in an inspirational aesthetic environment – enables the solitary individual to achieve the ecstatic sense of enlightenment possible from the most intense form of melancholy. Rousseau's solitary contemplations ultimately heighten the profoundly introspective properties of the simple existence that he celebrates in *Reveries*.

